

# Outbursts of Violence: Reaction to Oppression or Acts of Terrorism?

## An Analytical Study of Han Chinese and Uighur Muslims Relations

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On October 28, 2013, a group of five Chinese Uighur drove a jeep into Tiananmen Square in Beijing, set the gas tank on fire, killed two civilians and injured another forty bystanders.<sup>1</sup> The American media was blocked in the Chinese circuit, and the Han Chinese government immediately held the Uighurs of Northwest China responsible for the attack. There was evidence that the attackers had jihadist flags and probably had ties to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, my parents and brother arrived in Beijing on the same day to begin a ten-day Lutheran missionary trip through China. It was certainly nerve-wracking to hear of a “terrorist” attack in China when

1 Jiang, Steven, and Katie Hunt. “Five Arrested in Tiananmen Square Incident, Deemed a Terrorist Attack.” *CNN* 30 Oct. 2013: n. Print.

2 Ibid.

my family was landing in the country.

I now know violent incidents are frequent occurrences and the Han Chinese government would label the Uighurs as violent terrorists to justify oppression against the ethnic group. The tension between the Uighur minority and the Han majority has instigated much of the violence in China. The Uighur, a Turkic-speaking group of ten million Muslims, reside mainly in the Xinjiang province of northwest China. The central question for both the Chinese government and state actors worldwide is whether the marginalization of the Uighurs by the Han Chinese inspires them to join forces with modern jihadists of the Islamic State. Recently, there have been many examples of Uighur violence in China. Just one year after the incident in Tiananmen Square, on March 2, 2014, eight Uighurs, allegedly armed with knives, attacked civilians in a train station in southern China. This event killed approximately thirty- three and wounded another 143.<sup>3</sup> At the site of the “Kunming Attack,” authorities claimed they found a jihadist East Turkistan Flag.<sup>4</sup> On May 31, 2014, a few Uighurs supposedly crashed two cars into an Urumqi market and killed thirty-one people.<sup>5</sup> It can be easy to agree with the Han government and label these events as “acts of terrorism.” One could then draw the conclusion that Uighurs are connected to the Islamic State and should be viewed through a parallel lens. A comprehensive understanding, however, sheds light on the flaws of such interpretations. Throughout the history of China, Muslims have been on the receiving end of stereotypes and mistreatment. Consequently, the Uighurs have grown frustrated, and many resent the Han government for what they perceive as unfair policies and practices. This paper is intended to address the questions as to whether these instances of Uighur violence are acts of terrorism or the result of ethnic oppression. To answer these questions, this paper examines China’s domestic Han-Uighur relations as well as the external influences of the War on Terrorism.

In responding to the questions of whether the instances of Uighur violence are outcomes of ethnic subjugation or terrorist activity, the key is to understand what the violence represents for the Uighur. Naturally, Uighur violence today

3 Associated Press. “China Blames Uighur Separatists for Knife Attack at Train Station That Leaves 33 People Dead.” *Fox News* 02 Mar. 2014: n. pag. Print.

4 “Urumqi Attack Kills 31 in China’s Xinjiang Region.” *BBC News*. N.p., 23 May 2014. Web. 29 June 2015.

5 Ibid.

stems from domestic factors including oppression from the Han, as well as from international factors including the global jihadist movement, globalization, and the development of the Islamic State. Since 1949, the Uighurs in China have been facing increased restriction from the Han government, including limitations on Islamic religious practices, control of mosques in local villages, and restrictions to enter the job force in growing industries. In the 1980s, the violence increased as the Muslims protested the subjugation; one of the most significant events was the Rushdie Affair in 1989, when 3,000 Muslims marched to Beijing, triggering similar responses throughout China. This violence shaped the events today that China now labels “acts of terrorism.”

Internationally, the events surrounding 9/11 changed the experience for Muslims in China. The countries in the international system continue to put forth policies to prevent terrorist attacks. Security continues to increase and the Uighurs have adapted themselves to the forces of globalization. The media, economics, and human rights groups play a role in the changing experiences of the Uighurs. The 9/11 attacks and subsequent events, many perpetrated by Islamist extremists, have tarnished the reputation of the Uighur. To understand whether the Uighur are acting against oppression or whether their outbursts are examples of terrorism, the history and global context must be comprehensively understood and evaluated.

## Historical Experiences of the Uighurs in China

Islam in China is historically as significant as Buddhism or Confucianism in the context of Uighur history in China. After the death of Muhammad, Muslims conquered land in the Middle East and developed a sophisticated army. A segment of the army came to the Chinese border in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and to establish contact with the Chinese Emperor.<sup>6</sup> Traders came from the Middle East and helped to develop the Silk Road. Many of these Muslims settled in the Western provinces of modern day China near Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, during the Ming dynasty, the Muslims integrated into Chinese society; in some instances even joining the Chinese army.<sup>7</sup>

During the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, during the Qing dynasty, violence increased

6 “Islam in China.” *China Highlights.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.

7 Poston, Dudley, Wadha Saeed Khamis Alnuaimi, and Li Zhang. “The Social Demography of China’s Muslims.” *Modern China Studies* 18.1 (2011): 14-71. Ebsco.com.Web. 2 Apr. 2015.

significantly between the Qing Dynasty and Muslims. Sinicization was largely directed at the Muslim minorities in China and the Confucians tried to replace the native Muslim tribal systems with Chinese administration. The government sent Han immigrants to the region with the order to assimilate the Muslims into “mainstream Han culture.” Generally speaking, the Muslims faced marginalization, discrimination, and subjugation by the government rather than assimilation. The oppression from the central government, has contributed to the Uighur violence that has become prevalent today.

After the Qing dynasty, the experiences for most Uighurs in China changed significantly. Once the dynasty officially ended in 1912, the Uighurs enjoyed a level of autonomy in northwest China. In 1933, Turkic Rebels declared the land to be named the Islamic Republic of East Turkistan.<sup>8</sup> This autonomy was short-lived, and in 1949 with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Communist party took control of the land and declared it a province of China again. The PRC opposed the Uighurs, a minority collectivized around a religion, for fear of potential rebellion. The communists argued that Xinjiang province had been a part of China since 200 B.C.E.<sup>9</sup> Though the PRC promised a degree of cultural autonomy through Article 77 in the new constitution, the policy restriction essentially nullified the freedoms that the Uighurs were given.<sup>10</sup> Certainly some of the violent tendencies of the Uighur, emerged prior to 1949, however, the shift in government rule altered Beijing’s strategy toward the Uighur significantly. From 1951–53, the PRC expropriated religious lands. In 1954, China adopted the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) to foster the assembly of agricultural hubs in western China. The XPCC used security forces and police to control the region and execute Beijing’s goal to move “westward.”<sup>11</sup> In many ways, this plan failed to provide the same infrastructure and development that was evident

8 “Uighurs and China’s Xinjiang Region.” *Council on Foreign Relations*. Council on Foreign Relations, 29 Mar. 2012. Web. 30 June 2015.

9 Ibid.

10 “Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization.” *UNPO: Cultural Policy in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (East Turkistan)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 June 2015. Article 77 of the Constitution allows the deputies to the National People’s Congress to be under the supervision of units, which elected them.

11 “Uighurs and China’s Xinjiang Region.” *Council on Foreign Relations*. Council on Foreign Relations, 29 May 2012. Web. 30 June 2015.

in Special Economic Zones like Shenzhen. The centers of culture in China experienced greater success and development.

Additionally, due to Beijing's development plan, the percentage of Uighurs living in Xinjiang dropped from 76 percent in 1949 to 47 percent in 1986.<sup>12</sup> China justified this shift in demographics as a necessary economic policy that the Uighurs were simply not equipped to handle.<sup>13</sup> Beijing argued that the reforms instituted in education, coupled with the Han military presence would strengthen the region. In reality, the Uighurs were treated as second-class citizens that Beijing hoped to control in the region. The central government planned to strengthen the Xinjiang economy, but there was also a motivation to ethnically cleanse the region of Muslims and eliminate sentiments of separatism. The west remained a frontier and the attempts to develop the land actually had an adverse effect and created tension between the Han immigrants and the Uighur populations.

Notably, the Uighurs attitude towards the traditional Confucian concept of filial piety is another factor in the historical analysis of the Uighur in the PRC era. According to Raphael Israeli, a scholar with specific research interests in central Asia, the principle of "Xiao (孝)" or filial piety is one of the central tenets of Chinese Confucianism.<sup>14</sup> The respect for ancestors, be it the relationship of the parent to son, tutor to student, or emperor to society is central to the success of humanity.<sup>15</sup> Since the Uighur do not follow the practice of filial piety, the Han Chinese have found further reason to justify the Uighurs as social outcasts.

The condemnation of the Uighur culture did not end with the criticism of their filial piety, but rather many factors contributed to the Uighur suppression during the PRC. The Han took most opportunities to patronize and demonize the Uighur. Early 1950s marked the beginning of Islamaphobia in China. The organization of their societies was a key catalyst for the tension; Muslims in China focused on the local congregation, but understood their role in the larger Islamic community. Individual Uighurs focused on their local organization, but felt a spiritual connection to Mecca and Allah making

12 "Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization." *UNPO: Cultural Policy in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (East Turkistan)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 June 2015.

13 Ibid.

14 Israeli, Raphael. *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002. Print.p.10.

15 Ibid, p.11.

the conformity to Confucianism in China more difficult. Conversely, the Han were conditioned by Confucianism and found it easier to conform to the Confucian government.<sup>16</sup> Differences in social organizations, cultural traditions and religious practices were the breeding grounds for violence. As early as the 1950s the Han Chinese began to fear Muslims for their religious practices and rituals. This fear prompted reforms from the Han Chinese that served to increase the violence and perpetuate the Uighur hostility.

In the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution completely transformed the Uighur experience in China. During the Cultural Revolution (1966 until 1979), Beijing fought diligently to control the Uighurs. Mosques were shut down and littered with pigs to disparage the Muslim tradition. Uighur language was banned from schools, and writers were arrested for attempts to advance separatism. Those Uighurs wearing beards or head scarves were arrested on the streets.<sup>17</sup> These restrictions laid the groundwork for the violence that is prevalent today. Mao Zedong's goal was to eliminate the vestige of a traditional Chinese society and replace it with communist rule extended to all of China. His efforts to bring a new found stability into China through heavy-handed political mechanisms actually initiated violence in the Xinjiang province.

It is worth noting that Uighur are not the only Muslim group in China. The Uighur are the largest Muslim group with ten million people concentrated in the Xinjiang province of China's northwest.<sup>18</sup> The Hui are the second largest Muslim group with 9.5 million people who are spread in all of the major cities.<sup>19</sup> The Hui are considered to be the most assimilated because of their efforts to speak Mandarin and their abandonment of Islamic religious practices like the five daily prayers and the fasting during Ramadan. Part of the assimilation could be geography since there are many Hui located in Dongbei region as well as Beijing, while the Uighurs are centered in Xinjiang closer to the Middle East than East Asia. Thus, the Hui are considered the "good Muslims" in the eyes of Han Chinese, while Uighurs are the "bad Muslims."<sup>20</sup> There are eight additional groups of Muslim minorities including: the Kazak, Dongxiang,

16 Israeli, Raphael. *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002. Print. p. 18.

17 Kurlantzick, Joshua. "The Unsettled West." *Foreign Affairs* July 2004: n. pag. Print.

18 Poston, Dudley, Wadha Saeed Khamis Alnuaimi, and Li Zhang. "The Social Demography of China's Muslims." *Modern China Studies* 18.1 (2011): 14-71. Ebsco.com.Web. 2 Apr. 2015.

19 Ibid, p.20.

20 Ibid, p.28.

Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Bonan, Ozbek, and Tatar.<sup>21</sup> Its behavior of each Muslim group is directly dependent upon their experience as a minority in China.

Even the Hui were on the receiving end of violence from the Han government. In 1967, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) closed mosques and burned Islamic books in Shadian, a Hui village. Many of the Hui came to Beijing and protested the discrimination and restriction of their religious practice. This protest escalated and at one point involved nearly 10,000 PLA troops to suppress the "violence." This event killed 1,000 Hui and destroyed close to 4,000 homes.<sup>22</sup> The way of PLA suppression was clearly excessive, however, there were no clear ramifications for the Army. This serves as an example of the mistreatment that Muslims (not only Uighurs) experienced during the 1960s. Arguably, the Hui protests triggered the PLA action, however, there are even worse incidents exemplified by the Uighurs. In 1968, the East Turkistan People's Revolution Party, established by the Soviet Union, smashed the headquarters of the CCP in Yining after the central government attempted to stop Muslims fleeing to the Soviet Union<sup>23</sup>. The heavy-handed control from Beijing resulted in greater unrest from the Uighurs and led to further violence throughout the early 1970s.

In 1978, the political climate in China changed as the central government modernized under Deng Xiaoping. The PRC decided to shift focus back to the 1954 Constitution in the spirit of progress. In theory, this change granted ethnic minorities the right to preserve their customs within the protection of Chinese law.<sup>24</sup> Rafael Israeli discusses the fact that Chinese Muslims stand out from other ethnic minorities for several reasons. First, Muslims are not concentrated into one province and therefore cannot be dealt with as one "autonomous region." Second, Chinese Muslims think of Allah and Islam in higher regard than central Chinese authority. Third, Chinese Islam is not only a religion, but also a way of life; Muslims organize their day through their prayers, and follow detailed prescriptions from the Qur'an about how to live a holy, meaningful life of service.<sup>25</sup> These differences make it very

21 Ibid, pp.30-34

22 Israeli, Raphael. *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002. Print. p.263.

23 Wang, David. *Under the Soviet Shadow: The Yining Incident of 1944-1949 in Xinjiang*. Diss. University of Tasmania, Australia, 1993. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

24 Ibid, p.241.

25 Ibid, p.242.

difficult for the Han Chinese to easily “deal” with the Uighur and Muslims as an entire minority. As time progressed, the opinion of the Han towards Uighurs became increasingly hostile and by the 1980s the government began to label Uighurs as “terrorists.”

In the late 1970s, the government under Deng Xiaoping, seemed to loosen its grip on Muslims in China in the spirit of modernization. The restriction to attend Hajj was lifted by the PRC in 1979 and today a total of 50,000 Muslims from China have made the spiritual journey to Saudi Arabia.<sup>26</sup> The Uighurs welcomed this conciliatory gesture by Beijing government in the short term, but in the long term it backfired. Historical ties to Islam inspired many Uighurs to migrate or partake on the pilgrimage to Mecca in order to renew their spiritual connection to Allah. As a result, the Uighurs became less loyal and more hostile to the central government. As time progressed, many of the economic reforms imposed by the Han government shortchanged minority groups in China. While the reforms were generally well received, the pricing reform, for example, that allowed for some fixed prices and other prices to float, benefited the rich and hurt the poor. The money supply also increased too dramatically leaving many factories out of business. In 1989, approximately 3,000 Muslims marched on Beijing, commonly referred to as the Rushdie Affair, which subsequently inspired similar marches in other regions. In Lanzhou, known as the Mecca of China’s Islamic community, as many as 20,000 Muslims marched to protest the religious restrictions, lack of job opportunities, and overall quality of life within the Han government in power.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, China could no longer isolate its Muslims from the Islamic world evident by the thousands of Chinese Muslims who attended the annual Hajj in Mecca.<sup>28</sup> As the world changed and cultures began to more easily “clash,” the Muslims in China yearned for more than the repression they experienced within their borders.

## The Uighur Experience After 9-11

The Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon completely changed the daily life for the Uighurs in China. Most Muslims witnessed drastic transformations, and depending on the individual, the experience that followed the terrorist attacks was quite difficult.

Through globalization, the Uighurs found themselves living in a

26 “Islam in China.” *China Highlights.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.

27 Israeli, Raphael. *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002. Print. p. 267.

28 *Ibid*, p. 272.



global society that feared Islamic Terrorism. In the United States, the Bush administration stressed the policy that countries either had to align with the U.S and combat terrorism or they would be considered an enemy. As China increases its international profile, it likely felt the need to publicly support the United States' War on Terror. On November 29, 2001, China released a document through the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, which stated that the "East Turkistan" terrorists had carried out several attacks. Arguably, China had been dealing with the Uighur issue prior to 9-11, but the shift in focus on Islamic extremism likely prompted Beijing to formally classify ETIM as a terrorist organization and back the fight on terrorism. These attacks began in 1990 within China's borders and in 1997 outside of China primarily in Turkey and Uzbekistan. The release provided information, which cited direct ties to Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban. The report stated that the Eastern

Islamic Movement (ETIM) was led by Bin Laden, had received training and weapons from the Taliban, and "fought in combats in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Uzbekistan, or returned to Xinjiang for terrorist and violent activities."<sup>29</sup> In the wake of 9/11, China's report on terrorism within their borders alarmed U.S. officials. The U.S. quickly labeled ETIM as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group" in 2002, and detained at least twenty-two Uighurs at Guantanamo Bay throughout the war.<sup>30</sup> Some of these Uighurs were apprehended by coalition forces in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and sent to Guantanamo Bay.<sup>31</sup> The United States government was very willing to apprehend Uighurs at Guantanamo Bay and then allow the Chinese government access to these individuals. A U.S. Department of Justice briefing from the FBI reports that several Uighur detainees were subjected to sleep deprivation while interrogated at Guantanamo Bay.<sup>32</sup> It is clear that the United States also

29 Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN. "Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by "Eastern Turkistan" Organizations and Their Links with Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban." *Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by "Eastern Turkistan" Organizations and Their Links with Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban*. N.p., 29 Nov. 2001. Web. 30 June 2015.

30 Drennan, Justine. "Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse?" *Foreign Policy Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse Comments*. Foreign Policy, 09 Feb. 2015. Web. 30 June 2015.

31 Tharoor, Ishaan. "A Brief History of the Uighurs." *TIME* 9 July 2009: n. pag. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.

32 United States of America. Department of Justice. Office of Inspector General. *A Review of the FBI's Involvement in and Observations of Detainee Interrogations in Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan, and Iraq*. N.p.: n.p., 2008. Print.

felt that the Uighurs should be treated as terrorists alongside Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists.

Prior to 9/11, Uighur violence was not a “hot topic” issue studied among scholars. However, the increased focus on the Uighurs due to the possible connection to terrorism has resulted in an increased interest in the Uighurs. Global context plays a large role in answering the question of whether or not the outbursts by the Uighurs are acts of terrorism. Through the media, economics, and human rights groups, countries around the world have begun to pay closer attention to the activities of the Uighurs and the Chinese response.

It is also important to note the difficulty for Muslims to live everyday life China as a result of 9/11. On July 5, 2009, in Urumqi, violence broke out between Uighurs and Han, which left 140 dead and 830 arrested. One hospital did record 274 patients, only 54 of which were Muslims. The hospital stated there were significantly more Han casualties than Uighurs, although both sides suffered losses.<sup>33</sup> The primary cause for the violence was the Shaoguan incident, which occurred a month before, in which Han toy factory workers blamed two Uighur men for the sexual assault of a Han woman. While killing is not justifiable, many question the validity of Uighur protests and violence against the Han. Analyzing the situation only through the lens of the Han would not be fair. Arguably, the event was provoked in part by the Han and blaming the Uighurs is not an accurate depiction of the regional security in Urumqi. The immediate interviews with local Han reported that they felt more secure against Uighurs with the increased police presence. Various sources that refrain from identifying as Uighur, Han, or another ethnicity provide descriptions that Uighur hospital workers refused care to Han and beat and killed Han in the streets.<sup>34</sup> From the alternate perspective, the Uighurs began by peacefully protesting the lack of government action in regards to the factory incident the month before. It was not until the Chinese police forces brutally attempted to restrain the Uighurs that the violence turned deadly.<sup>35</sup> The original intent of the Uighurs was peaceful communication with the central government and

33 Branigan, Tania. “Ethnic Violence in China Leaves 140 Dead.” *The Guardian.com*. N.p., 6 July 2009. Web. 30 June 2015.

34 Branigan, Tania. “Ethnic Violence in China Leaves 140 Dead.” *The Guardian.com*. N.p., 6 July 2009. Web. 30 June 2015.

35 “Worldwide Uyghur Protests on Second Anniversary of 5 July 2009.” *Uyghurcongress.org*. World Uyghur Congress, 8 July 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.

expression of opinion rather than traumatic, impactful violence.

After the 2009 incident in Urumqi, the central government began to implement restrictions on the Uighurs pertaining to employment, religious practice, and social identity. The primary cause of these restrictions is the population growth of Uighurs in the Xinjiang province and the need for the central government to provide adequate resources for survival. Wealth is consolidated in the hands of the Han in China, so the Han saw reforms for the Uighur as policy improvements.<sup>36</sup> The primary issue, however, is that both private and public organizations have discriminatory hiring processes and believe that because of their wealth and social standing in China, they have the right to place restrictions on the Uighur.<sup>37</sup> Many of these restrictions were then supported by the central government. For example, in 2014, two significant restrictions were placed on Uighurs by the Han government. The first restriction occurred in July of 2014, when China banned fasting during Ramadan in Xinjiang. It is likely with the increasing numbers of Uighurs traveling to Mecca for Hajj and as China's international profile elevates, it feels more justifiable to emulate the American and Western European in their approach to counter Islamist extremists. In China's case, the violence perpetrated by the Uighurs served as a pretext for further crackdown. It is more convenient to say any acts of violence are acts of terrorism. For example, in the Ruqiang county of Xinjiang, teachers were denied the freedom to fast for Ramadan, and posters were hung in the school advocating that students also refrain from the practice.<sup>38</sup> Most recently, in January of 2015, also in Urumqi, burqas were prohibited and a law passed that restricted residents from wearing the traditional Muslim head covering in public places.<sup>39</sup> In Karamay, the burqa, large beards, and dresses with the star and crescent symbol were also prohibited.<sup>40</sup> The Han's purpose for such restrictions is fairly simplistic: to create one uniform Chinese culture rid of all ties to traditional Muslim practices. While it is important to note that many minorities in Southeast China, such as Yunnan and Guangxi,

36 Bhattacharji, Preeti. "Uighurs and China's Xinjiang Region." *Council on Foreign Relations*. Council on Foreign Relations, 29 May 2012. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.

37 Ibid.

38 Associated Press. "China Bans Ramadan Fasting in Muslim Northwest | Al Jazeera America." *China Bans Ramadan Fasting in Muslim Northwest | Al Jazeera America*. N.p., 3 July 2014. Web. 30 June 2015.

39 Jiang, Steven. "China Bans Wearing Burqa in Biggest Muslim City." *CNN.com*. N.p., 14 Jan. 2015. Web. 8 Apr. 2015.

40 Jiang, Steven. "China Bans Wearing Burqa in Biggest Muslim City." *CNN.com*. N.p., 14 Jan. 2015. Web. 8 Apr. 2015.

do enjoy some level of cultural autonomy, the Xinjiang province has been especially repressed for their religious differences.

Beijing's goal to restrict Muslims in China is more complex than just banning burqas or fasting. Due to the increased violent tendencies of the Uighurs, China has even gone as far to label some Uighur extremist groups as terrorists. For example, on April 28, 2013, a press release on CCTV blamed a violent clash that killed fifteen on "terrorists" from the "Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region."<sup>41</sup> The media in China more often than not portrays the Uighur Muslims as terrorists. Though the central government does not view all Uighurs as terrorists, the media portrayal is not balanced and representative of the Uighurs as an entire ethnic group.

## **The Media: Portrayal of the Uighurs through Western lens**

Internationalization of the Global War on Terrorism played a role in the media and helped shape the western perspective on Muslims in Central Asia and China. In the media, the U.S. and Great Britain are the primary news sources publishing articles on Uighurs outside of China. The media has a tendency to polarize political situations; often, have either labeled the Uighurs as "terrorists" or as freedom fighters rebelling against the oppressive, communist rule. For example, recently, *TIME* magazine, an article was published titled, "Deadly Terrorist Attack in Southwestern China Blamed on Separatist Muslim Uighurs." The article uses rhetoric such as "bloodshed," "assailants," and "wielding attackers" to describe the Uighurs.<sup>42</sup> The U.S. as the main force fighting the Global War on Terrorism, faces an especially difficult position. Thus, does the U.S. have to choose between supporting the Uighurs as freedom fighters versus supporting China as an ally? This question probes at the very nature of the U.S. position internationally. The U.S. certainly has a vested interest in the affairs of Central Asia. Following 9/11, the U.S. media tracked the possibility of terrorism emerging in all corners of the world. In a recent *Foreign Policy* article titled, "Is China making its own Terrorism Problem Worse?" a State Department official says that the U.S. designated

41 "Authorities Identify 15 Victims in Xinjiang Terrorist Clash." *CCTV* [Beijing] 29 Apr. 2013: n. pag. Print.

42 Beech, Hannah. "Deadly Terrorist Attack in Southwestern China Blamed on Separatist Muslim Uighurs." *Time*. Time, n.d. Web. 07 Nov. 2015.

East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization because of the evidence that China posted at the time about terrorist attacks on China's homeland and the connection to the Xinjiang province.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, the U.S. government took the Chinese opinion at face value. Though we cannot be certain of the true opinions of U.S. government officials, in reality, the U.S. willingly agreed with China and supported ETIM being labeled as a terrorist organization. Perhaps this was to maintain peace; however, the U.S. has changed its opinion in the media and has offered increased sympathy for the Uighurs. For example, in the *Christian Monitor*, an article titled, "China's Uighurs: Who are they, and why are they unhappy?" questions exactly who the Uighur are as an ethnic group, outlines their grievances, and offers solutions for the central government. One suggestion is made that Beijing focus on the economic development in Xinjiang rather than strictly working to "combat terrorism." This is a common theme throughout U.S. policy and the State Department has since removed ETIM from the list of terrorist organizations.<sup>44</sup>

Recently, the western media is the portrayal of the Uighurs' lifestyle on a day-to-day basis. Justine Drennan makes the claim that scholars, human rights groups, and Uighur advocates are arguing that China is exacerbating the threat of the Uighurs to validate the actions taken in Xinjiang.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in *The Atlantic* piece, "The Uighurs, China's Embattled Muslim Minority," James Palmer discusses the Uighurs' struggle to find their identity in the post 9-11 world. The article sheds light on renowned Shanghai photographer, Eleanor Moseman, who provides images of the Uighurs in their everyday life to express that they are still actively searching for their identity within the PRC and the Muslim community.<sup>46</sup> This representation considerate of the Uighur situation in Xinjiang, aims to share more about the Uighurs as worthy of rights and freedom to enjoy everyday life. According to PBS, Ms. Moseman has embarked on biking expeditions to the Xinjiang province and spent over

43 Drennan, Justine. "Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse?" *Foreign Policy Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse Comments*. Foreign Policy, 09 Feb. 2015. Web. 30 June 2015.

44 Ford, Peter. "China's Uighurs: Who Are They, and Why Are They Unhappy?" *CS Monitor*. N.p., 9 Nov. 2013. Web. 7 Nov. 2015.

45 Drennan, Justine. "Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse?" *Foreign Policy Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse Comments*. Foreign Policy, 09 Feb. 2015. Web. 30 June 2015.

46 Palmer, James. "The Uighurs, China's Embattled Muslim Minority, Are Still Seeking an Identity." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 27 Sept. 2013. Web. 30 June 2015.

a year living with Uighur families to provide the most accurate depiction of how the Uighurs live. Her photography shows the tender love Uighur women have for their babies, generations living under one roof, and Uighur men and boys praying publicly before school daily.<sup>47</sup> Recently, the *Global Times* reported that 300 Chinese extremists have been fighting alongside ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In January of 2015, another 300 Chinese left for Malaysia to join the organization.<sup>48</sup> Though this figure cannot be validated, the reality is that when the media uses a fear-inducing, hyperbolic tone for their reports there are detrimental effects for the Uighur. First, it paints the Uighurs in a light that classifies them as equal to ISIS. As media outlets repeat these numbers, it creates a fear against Uighurs. This fear then creates anger and hostility for young Uighurs who may join ISIS in pursuit of a cause that is meaningful to them. Though 300 may seem like a high number when publicized in the media, it is important to remember that there are 10 million Uighurs in China. This means that only .003% of the population is possibly linked to the Islamic State terrorist organization. Perspective is important in understanding the gravity of the media reports.

## **Economics: Oil Industry and Uighur Discontent**

Another aspect of the global context for Uighurs is the increasing interest in the Xinjiang province due to the region's oil sources. This contributes to Han enthusiasm to build infrastructure and to encourage Han immigrants to settle in the region. As of 2014, oil from the Xinjiang province accounted for one-fifth of total oil in China. Thus, in China's new five-year plan, Xinjiang is be considered one of the main energy bases with the aim to build a "New Silk Road" stretching from Xinjiang to Central Asia and Europe.<sup>49</sup> China is investing billions in regional infrastructure to create electricity lines and oil plants. Oil, natural gas, and coal are all found in abundance in the Xinjiang province. Companies such as PetroChina are capitalizing on the opportunity to profit by exporting these high demand resources internationally. Investors are

47 Ponsot, Elisabeth. "Who Are the Uighurs?" *PBS.org*. PBS, 12 Oct. 2013. Web. 7 Nov. 2015.

48 Yongzheng, Qiu. "Turkey's Ambiguous Policies Help Terrorists Join IS Jihadist Group: Analyst." *Global Times*. N.p., 15 Dec. 2014. Web. 30 June 2015.

49 Wong, Edward. "China Invests in Region Rich in Oil, Coal and Also Strife." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 20 Dec. 2014. Web. 30 June 2015.

key to the success of this new enterprise, and China is looking internationally for employees consequently eliminating the Uighur workforce. For example, the New York Times reported in October of 2013, that half of the positions in the oil industry were labeled as non-Muslim only. Thus, the Uighur were frozen out of the gas and oil industries. The situation heightened as local authorities introduced restrictions on the beards and burqas of Uighurs. It is important to understand that through economics, Beijing could very well be radicalizing the young, unemployed Uighurs. The radicalized Uighurs then speak out in the form of organized protests and rallies fighting for their ability to have a steady income and participate in their local economy. The hiring discrimination is due in part because of ethnic tension between the Han run companies and the Uighur “slums.” As the “insurgencies” from Uighurs increase in frequency, the Han are less willing to hire them to work in the oil companies and more likely to impose restrictions on their Islamic faith.<sup>50</sup> Though the same argument could be made for disadvantaged Muslims elsewhere, the Uighurs are a unique story because typically the indigenous is actually forced to work in the critical industries for low pay. In the case of the Uighur, they are not even being given the chance to have employment.

## **Advocacy Groups: Uighur Activism in a Globalized World**

Advocacy groups have emerged recently to promote better standards of living and employment opportunities for the Uighurs. The largest Uighur advocacy group is the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) based in Munich, Germany. From April 13-16, 2014, the WUC along with the Underrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) held a conference. This conference aimed to “lift the veil” on the secrecy of the “killing” of Uighur in northwest China, to raise awareness, and create the foundation for a dialogue about the issue.<sup>51</sup> This kind of international conversation about the Uighur is a recent phenomenon. International Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and representatives from more than fifteen countries were in attendance at the conference. This collaboration has laid the groundwork for the possibility of both terrorism stemming from the region and a significant case of human

50 China Invests in Region Rich in Oil, Coal and Also Strife

51 “Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization.” *UNPO: Cultural Policy in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (East Turkistan)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 June 2015.

rights violations from the Han government. Thus, the question of whether the Uighur are terrorists or oppressed minorities is extremely difficult to answer.

In *Familiar Strangers*, Jonathan Lipman argues that the world must know the historical context of the Uighur violence. He points out that in America we needed to tell the story of the African American or the woman because they were just as much a part of the history as were the white people or the men.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, in connection to the situation in China, hasty generalizations lead to oversimplifications about the Uighur Muslims. Lipman is arguing that history cannot be a dichotomy in which a person must be “more Chinese or more Muslim,” but rather, that they could be both at once.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, Beijing labeling the Uighurs as distinctly different than the Han majority undermines their efforts at peace. The Uighurs feel more isolated and “separate” from the central government and do not respect the Han as a legitimate form of government.

## **Outbursts of Violence: Reaction to Oppression or Acts of Terrorism?**

This paper focused on what the outbursts of violence represent for Uighurs in China. History and the global context must be evaluated and understood at the most nuanced level.

Historically, after the PRC was founded, Uighurs faced a new experience in China. Even though all religions experienced a change, the Uighurs suffered considerably worse. Though promised autonomy at first, the Xinjiang province was taken in 1949 and the new government controlled increased amounts of the territory through the expropriation of religious lands. During the 1960's Cultural Revolution, the Han took control of mosques, increased restrictions on religious practices and began to increase the presence of the PLA to control the “rebellious” Uighur. In a matter of a few decades, the Uighur lost their livelihood and their freedom. In the 1980s, the Uighur were tired of remaining silent to the mistreatment. In 1989, during the Rushdie Affair, 3,000 Muslims marched on Beijing. This inspired similar marches in northwest China. The Rushdie Affair marked the beginning of the modern day violence that remains in the news cycles today. As globalization became a reality, Muslims in China became markedly interested in their connection to the Islamic World. The

52 Lipman, Jonathan Neaman. *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*. Seattle: U of Washington, 1997. Print. p. 212.

53 Ibid, p.227.



number of participants that attended the Hajj in Mecca grew exponentially.

In terms of the global context, 9/11 changed the dialogue in regard to “terrorism.” Though the public does not know the exact reasons for China’s actions in 2001 following the attacks on the U.S., China released the document labeling the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization. The U.S. supported China’s distinction of Uighurs as terrorists. As time progressed, the voices of Human Rights organizations and the U.S. media became more sympathetic and described Uighurs as persecuted ethnic minorities in need of international reprieve. As a result, the truth is hard to discern in amongst the varying labels for Uighurs. In my opinion, terrorism certainly exists in northwest China. It cannot be denied that some Uighurs are involved with ETIM and ISIS and have the goal to embark on international jihad to establish the Islamic State. With that being said, domestic factors are exacerbating the issue in China. Not all Uighurs are terrorists, and in fact, most are not. Generally speaking, the Uighurs are an oppressed ethnic minority having to acclimate themselves to a world that fears Islam and terrorism.

The question of the Uighurs is difficult to discern with a balanced approach. In good conscience, one cannot say they are more “oppressed ethnic minority” or more “Islamic terrorist.” Rather, the best answer is that within their culture and ethnic group there are some Uighurs that are terrorists that have joined forces with ISIS. Conversely, the majority of Uighurs simply wants to live their lives. Therefore, the Han are not justified to treat the Uighurs as second-class citizens and restrict their religious freedoms. Domestic factors play the largest role in the violence and, in fact, have instigated violence in China. Uighur ferocity is primarily rooted in the economic deprivation, restriction, and persecution by the Han government. A very small percentage of the Uighurs have identified with the goals of the. I argue that by peeling into the roots of the Uighur experience and understanding the context of Muslims in China helps to understand the acts of violence. Though terrorist in nature, the outbursts should be considered expressions of resentment for years of subjugation by the Han Chinese. The situation is complex and history plays an important role in being able to grasp the political situation for the Uighur going forward.

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